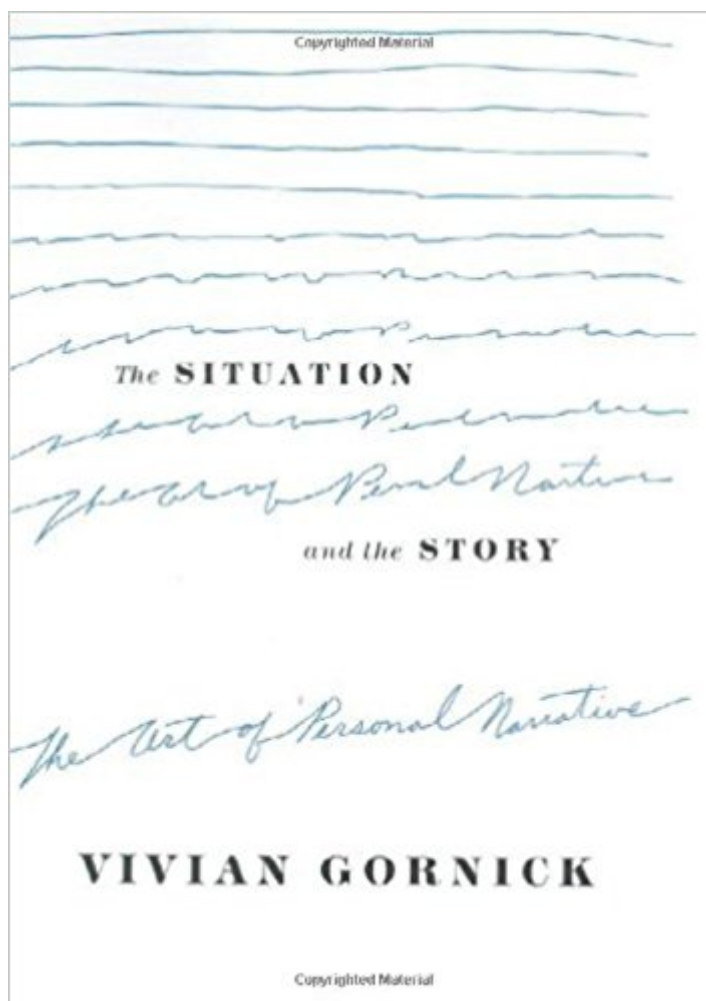


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# The Situation And The Story: The Art Of Personal Narrative



## Synopsis

A guide to the art of personal writing, by the author of *Fierce Attachments* and *The End of the Novel of Love*. All narrative writing must pull from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver a bit of wisdom. In a story or a novel the "I" who tells this tale can be, and often is, an unreliable narrator but in nonfiction the reader must always be persuaded that the narrator is speaking truth. How does one pull from one's own boring, agitated self the truth-speaker who will tell the story a personal narrative needs to tell? That is the question *The Situation and the Story* asks--and answers. Taking us on a reading tour of some of the best memoirs and essays of the past hundred years, Gornick traces the changing idea of self that has dominated the century, and demonstrates the enduring truth-speaker to be found in the work of writers as diverse as Edmund Gosse, Joan Didion, Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, or Marguerite Duras. This book, which grew out of fifteen years teaching in MFA programs, is itself a model of the lucid intelligence that has made Gornick one of our most admired writers of nonfiction. In it, she teaches us to write by teaching us how to read: how to recognize truth when we hear it in the writing of others and in our own.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With her essays regularly appearing in high-profile periodicals, anthologies and partisan-attracting books like *Fierce Attachments* and *The End of the Novel of Love*, Gornick is one of a handful of nonfiction prose stylists whose work is instantly recognizable to the literati and crititocracy. Based on many years' teaching in a variety of creative writing programs, Gornick's book discusses ways of

making nonfiction writing highly personal without being pathetically self-absorbed. In admirably plain and direct style, she discusses writers as diverse as Oscar Wilde, Joan Didion and a man she calls the "Jewish Joan Didion," Seymour Krim. Part of the virtue of this book is Gornick's wide-ranging reading, which comprises less-than-household names like Jean Amery, a Belgium-based Holocaust survivor, and the noted Italian author Natalia Ginzburg. By excerpting and condensing freely, she presents chosen texts in speedily absorbed format, which is useful for the primer-style approach here, even if some of the original authors might object to being Readers Digested in this manner. All the texts do nevertheless support her statement that essays can "be read the way poems and novels are read, inside the same kind of context, the one that enlarges the relationship between life and literature." (Sept.) Forecast: Poised for a warm embrace in writing programs and college seminars, this slim tome from a nonfiction master will undoubtedly inspire young writers, while Gornick's loyal fans will enjoy her unmistakable erudition and felicitous prose. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Noted critic/essayist Gornick (*Fierce Attachments*) has taught creative writing for decades, and this is the repository of her experience. She divides her subject into two parts: the essay and the memoir. While the latter essentially reflects personal experience, Gornick reminds us that an essayist is also writing personally. Drawing on classic essayists from George Orwell to Oscar Wilde, Gornick analyzes the writers' lives and sees their essays as much as possible through their eyes. She is careful to distinguish the teaching of the writing process from teaching writing, which she dismisses as impossible. Using lengthy excerpts from her favorites, Gornick presents a psychology of writing. Teaching thus by example, she creates a spare but elegant tool. Recommended for academic and public collections.- Robert Moore, Itworld.com, Southboro, MA Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Perfect looking book, great delivery (Prime) I splurged. So happy to get this; other writers borrow and never return. I' read every work Vivian Gornick wrote. I wish SHE appreciated herself as much as I do. Every writer needs this book. Every memoir writer must owny, read, and re-read this book. The must, I insist, must, read *Fierce Attachments*. I own every Gornick book. I have to replace them because somebody borrows and never returns. Sigh. But I must own every copy, especially these two, to refer back to many times a year. I hold friends captive reading passages to them aloud.

It feels disrespectful to offer anything but praise for a book that captured the distance it takes to

execute memoir pieces successfully. For writers wrangling with their personal material, trying to turn it into an engaging narrative that along the way may enlighten the reader, this is the premiere text. My purpose was to know what it took and this book describes the process with convincing clarity. What I did not enjoy about the book was its format. It was organized like a text with samples of mostly obscure memoirs and personal essays that the author then critiqued for you. Without having read those works in their original form I had only a cursory interest in her description of the content of those pieces and found myself reading hurriedly to get to the part about technique. When I purchased the book I knew nothing about it and mistakenly expected a discussion of memoir writing without frills. The book was more than that. Without a doubt, I think it is filled with essential information for aspiring memoir writers. If you happen to be an instructor yourself, there are questions you may find useful at the back of the book.

If you are interested in the process of writing this is a good book. I am not sure I always agree with her assessments of various writers--Oscar Wilde for example--but Gornick is thoughtful and probing. She speaks with knowledge and experience on one of the most slippery facets of writing: the narrator's voice. This may be one of the very best books on the subject.

I heard about Vivian Gornick long before I discovered her book, *The Situation and the Story*. About 25 years ago, I had the good fortune to attend Gornick's presentation at a local college, and I've been a fan ever since. There is something about her writing that is just like her in person: authentic, completely honest, and absolutely serious. Gornick will call you out--in person or on the page. You must be fearless to discover yourself in your writing. Granted that most memoirs and autobiographies seem to be written by Anglo-Americans, *The Situation and the Story* is for everyone, but it's not a how-to book. You've got to do soul searching, and you've got to love discovering words and how to use them. What Gornick says about writing is true for all: "A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom" (91). In other words, the memoir you write is about yourself, but you can't simply record everything, every time someone hurt you, or all the pains you have suffered. Writing about your life is an art and craft. Gornick quotes V. S. Pritchett: "You get no credit for living" (91). Of course, you do have to place yourself in context, within the circumstances of your life. No one that I know writes a memoir without writing about their parents,

their town, or the schools they attended, or something about the world they've inherited. Gornick says you must know "Who exactly is this story-taken-directly-from-life? On that question," she continues, "the writer of memoir must deliver . . . with depth of inquiry" (92). If you are not used to writing, why not start with paragraphs? Keep a journal, write a page a day, until you are confident with your use of language. Take a class in memoir writing, and find a group of people among whom you can find support. Above all, be careful where you get your identity, and don't personalize all your failures. Look at the society in which you live. Gornick quotes from dozens of memoirs including from people who perceived themselves to be failures. Before you write a memoir, you must read what others have written. I've mentioned that Gornick's book is not a how-to, but she is the best guide a person could ask for. What a wonderful journey her book has been.

I've read many books on writing, but this is one of the best I've ever read for personal essay and memoir. Gornick really gets to the heart of what we who write from personal experience need to accomplish. It will make you go back and look - again - at your writing and see where you've missed or where you've succeeded. Highly recommend it.

Vivian Gornick is a fierce teacher. Her astounding intellect here is used to examine how a memoir works and how some fail to work. Her idea of the story, by which she means the combination of theme and writing style working together so the memoir's writer discovers within the journey of the text the contradictions within him or herself. But I haven't described that quite correctly. So please read Gornick's examination. Her writing pushes through and into the depths of the form and as in everything I've read by her, I want to follow that strong voice even when I'm not sure I understand where I am.

Gornick's obsession is persona, the truth-seeking and truth-speaking narrator and how that partial, constructed self relates to the tale being told. When you try to apply her interesting principles to some works you like, especially if they are very scenic and narrative-driven, it will drive you crazy. Ditto if you are a writer trying to do what she says you should do. But it's fascinating. And she discusses some really interesting essays and memoirs, many of them uncommon or forgotten classics.

You know---this was recommended to me by so my people. I put it off for years...and then I read it and I see why all the fuss. There really is a difference between The Situation and the Story. It's a simply book that you have to read because it's not so simple.

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